A Sacred Architecture for the Secular Spirit: An Institute for Mind/Body Training in New York City

by

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on January 19, 2001 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture

Abstract

The goal of the project is to design a non-sectarian meditation center in the dense urban area of New York City. The design challenge is to draw inspiration from an interpretation of ancient philosophies of meditation, without simply importing cultural relics from places in which those philosophies have flourished in the past. More difficult was the decision to apply meditation philosophy not just to the design, but to the process of designing.

The functional purpose of the building is somewhat flexible. People who practice meditation may or may not be involved with an organized religion. The current “Dharma scene” in America is extremely diverse. The purpose of the Center is to facilitate the exploration of the mind and reality that goes on in meditation. It might serve as a meeting place for various groups, and also as a center for the study and debate. Practitioners of different schools might meet to compare notes, or to attend conferences such as the Mind Science seminars held on a semi-annual basis by the Dalai Lama and researchers in the cognitive sciences.

Thesis Supervisor: Shun Kanda
Title: Senior Lecturer in Architecture
This thesis will explore the resolution of dualities within a paradigm that places more emphasis on interconnectedness than on separation. The development of a mind/body training institute, a sort of urban retreat center in Manhattan, will provide the ideal programmatic vehicle for this inquiry. Part "sacred" space for spiritual development, part "profane" gym, this center will house activities such as yoga, tai chi, meditation, and other practices that emphasize the concomitant development of mind and body.

This dialogue between separation and interconnectedness relates to the most basic purpose of architecture: to provide shelter by delineating inside from outside. Rather than attempting to completely seal out the outside environment and create an artificial environment within, the program should be one of interpenetration with site and surroundings. More than a mere container, the center should strike a balance between public and private space. The mind/body practices to be taught in the Institute can provide inspiration. Many were formerly "esoteric," available only to an inner core of followers. Now they are being taught openly, and in a cross-traditional setting that further breaks down concepts of "esoteric" and "exoteric." Within the practices are concepts (such as the circulation of vital energies) that can be explored for architectural parallels.

Such practices embody a philosophical paradigm of the interconnectedness of individual with nature and cosmos that is at variance with the view of humans as somehow separate, or above nature. After centuries founded on analysis through separation, Western science and philosophy are recognizing interpenetration from the quantum to ecological levels.

fig. 1

yoga and meditation session in New York City

fig. 2
The selection of an urban site for practices traditionally associated with pastoral surroundings brings evokes the dualism of city and country. Once, cities were walled off from dangerous countryside's rife with banditry. Now, city dwellers feel the need to import nature in the form of parks and community gardens. The practices of yoga, tai-chi, and other mind/body disciplines are extremely popular in cities like New York, and many centers of instruction are filled beyond capacity. In the midst of rushing through their days, more and more urbanites seek periods of slow time in such centers. They provide a venue for relaxation in a generally tense environment; an opportunity to explore the nature of self beneath the masks that are worn in various social interactions. Intensely personal, private explorations of mind and body are conducted in the public setting of a class or group. The resolution of all these dualistic modes is sought in an urban retreat center, and so its very structure and form should reflect the quest for synthesis.
Introduction
Meditation

Different forms of meditation have been practiced by in many cultures throughout history. My understanding of meditation can be traced primarily to the Buddha's teachings, known as the Dharma. The Buddha was not a god but a human being, a prince born about twenty-five hundred years ago, who renounced his vast inheritance to find the cause and cure for suffering. He is called "Buddha," which means "Awakened One," because he is said to have reached a state of total enlightenment. Any human being with sufficient motivation and practice can become a Buddha. Developing higher levels of awareness and wisdom through meditation is a major part of this process of spiritual evolution.

The goal of meditation is to observe the nature of the mind, to develop higher levels of awareness and equanimity, and root out all the addictive habit patterns that keep one caught in the cycle of suffering. The meditator's intentions are at least as important as the particular practice that is employed. Single-pointed concentration is a very important practice, but it is one used by hunters as well as meditators. The difference, according to the Buddha, is intent. The intent to kill does not lead to liberation, but the intent to benefit all beings does. When wisdom is cultivated, the path to compassionate action becomes clear.
Cultural Variations on the Theme of Wisdom

Wherever the Dharma has gone in the world, it has merged somewhat with the local culture. The core of most Buddhist societies is the monastic system, but many cultures seem to acknowledge that lay teachers and practitioners can be just as highly realized as monks. The degree to which Buddhism is an "organized religion" varies greatly from place to place in different times.

The transmission of the Dharma to the West has been underway for a few hundred years, but has accelerated rapidly in the past twenty-five. There are several monasteries in America, most of them based in a particular tradition imported from another country - Japanese and Tibetan sects of Buddhism are extremely popular. Many universities have departments of Buddhist Studies and there is a high degree of interest among people who are either not religious or consider themselves members of religions other than Buddhism.
Scientific Introspection

In the modern global culture of places like New York City, the scientific-materialistic paradigm is dominant, and blind faith is highly suspect. The increased interest in Buddhism may stem from the Buddha's insistence that people experience reality for themselves, not just accept his words as truth. Many people today are interested in the Buddha's teaching less as a religion and more as a vehicle for understanding.

“When I began to learn... meditation, I became convinced that Buddha was a not a founder of religion, he was a super-scientist... The whole process [of meditation] is one of total realization, the process of self-realization, truth pertaining to oneself, by oneself, within oneself. It is not an intellectual game. It is not an emotional or devotional game. It is pure science. I must understand what's happening within me, what's the truth within me.”

S.N. Goenka, Tricycle, Winter 2000

In this scientific investigation, the only instrument is awareness, and the field of observation is reality within the framework of one's own body and mind. This process of observation is not just intellectual self-analysis; it involves actually observing sensations and ideas as they arise and pass away, leading to an understanding of the impermanent nature of all phenomenon.

The eventual forms of practice and study that arise from this period remain to be seen, but one function of this urban meditation center is to facilitate the exchange of ideas from many sources, to become a syncretic repository of wisdom.
The City - At the Crossroads of Samsara and Nirvana

New York City is probably one of the most diverse and international cities in the world. Home to the UN and the powerful financial markets, it is also a famous home to immigrants from around the globe. It's a good bet that at least one person from every country lives in New York City. It is an incredible crossroads, a place brimming with creativity and terrible destruction.

The Buddhist idea of samsara, the cycle of suffering propelled by desire, greed, and hatred, is in full force in New York. But there is also great wisdom to be found in this city, which is home to teachers from many lineages of meditative practices. It is a wonderful place to observe the paradoxical teaching that samsara is not separate from nirvana; nirvana, the freedom from suffering, is a state of awareness free from clinging, not some remote heaven accessible only through mountain caves.

Despite the stereotype that contemplative practices can only take place in secluded retreats, many city-dwellers practice meditation on a regular basis, and New York is full of “Dharma Centers.” Many of them are located in lower Manhattan or Brooklyn, not far from the site.
Some Dharma Centers in Manhattan:

1. Columbia University Center for Buddhist Studies
   Robert A.F. Thurman, Chairman

2. Palden Sakya
   4-10 West 101 Street, Apt. 63

   250 West 99th Street

4. New York City Karma Thegsum Choling
   412 West End Avenue, #5N

5. New York Buddhist Church
   331-332 Riverside Drive

6. Manhattan Won Buddhist Temple
   431 East 57th St.

7. Patriarchal Zen Society
   43 West 33rd Street

8. The Tibet Center
   107 E. 31 St., 5th Fl.

9. New York Shambhala Center
   118 West 23rd Street, 6th Floor

10. Palyul Ling
    101 W. 23rd Street, 2336

11. Zen Center of New York City: Fire Lotus Zendo
    119 West 23rd Street, Room 1009

12. NY Shambhala Center
    118 West 22nd Street, 6th Floor

13. Tibet House TIBET HOUSE New York
    22 West 15th Street

14. Village Zendo
    15 Washington Place

15. Still Mind Zendo
    120 Washington Place (at 6th. Ave.)

16. Ordinary Mind Zendo
    33 Greenwich Ave. #4A

17. The Zen Studies Society
    223 East 67th Street

18. New York Zendo Shobo-ji
    233 E. 67th St.

19. Chogy International Zen Center
    400 East 14th Street #2E

20. Asian Classics Institute
    321 East 6th Street

21. Three Jewels Bookshop & Meditation Center
    211 East 5th Street

22. Palyul Changchub Dargyeling
    199 3rd Street near Avenue B

23. Soho Zendo
    464 West Broadway

24. Friends of the Western Buddhist Order
    Sufi Books 225 West Broadway.

25. Usa Shaolin Temple
    637 Broadway 3rd. floor (south of houston)

26. Tricycle: The Buddhist Review
    92 Vandam Street
Site

The site itself is at a crossroads. The numbered, orderly streets of Manhattan begin at 1st street, but south of Houston - on the other side of the site, the chaos of old lower Manhattan begins. The grid pattern is sustained, but it soon warps and the streets have names, not numbers. The site is itself a crossroads between these two parts of Manhattan, old and new. Pedestrians can pass through from 1st Ave to Houston Street, continuing across the street to Roosevelt Park that runs down into Chinatown. It is also a crossroads on another level: people can pass through, rushing along on whatever samsaric errand they're about, or they can stop and ascend the spiral ramp, potentially discovering new states of mind.
view down 1st Street from 1st Avenue to 2nd Avenue

close-up view of existing site void on 1st Street

view of site from Roosevelt Park across Houston Street

close-up view of site from Houston Street
This site is on an axis with Roosevelt Park and the F train subway. This area is heavily trafficked by both pedestrians and cars. Roosevelt Park and the F train subway stop mark the point or 'gateway' at which the Lower East Side neighborhood begins as one walks along Houston Street.
existing conditions:
aerial view of site.

- tenement buildings
- existing void
- lot line
- Houston Street
- Roosevelt Park
existing site condition view

proposed site condition view: appropriating 3 tenement lots
Site sketch notes...

First Street elevation:
- repetitive tenement typology
- opaque masonry materiality

importance of existing void in block/potential of void as a "throughway"

"public" alley proposal

current dominant circulation (Houston St.)

plan view

lot 1, lot 2, lot 3 (empty)
lot size: 25'W x 85'L
building: 25'W x 52'L x 55'H
initial architectural gestures:
light construction
suspended volumes
transparent infrastructure-a 'host'
element clinging to neighboring buildings

First Street elevation
floating volumes

significance of party walls as a residue

preserve existing void

open frames and grids
Process

Sketches, models, and diagrams were all tools in the process of trying to grapple with an architectural manifestation of the philosophy and ideas in Buddhism. The most difficult challenge involved manifesting philosophical ideas into physical realities. Rather than simply accommodating spaces for practices such as yoga and meditation, the initial investigation pondered more abstract ideas such as the meaning of interconnectedness, reality as it is, and other philosophies.

Most of the studies in the process dealt directly with the meaning of the site itself in form and urban context. This process of finding meaning in the site was itself a generator of a formal vocabulary, an architectural expression and a spatial programmatic definition.

An important conclusion of these studies was that it was not an entirely evolutionary process. The various outcomes were at times independent of each other. Not having a predetermined goal, allowing forms to arise in an intuitive manner, left the door open for results that were often at odds with each other.

Becoming overly attached to some of these early forms led to confusion, and it was often necessary to let them go in order to make room for new forms with greater clarity. Merging meditation philosophy with practice in this way was not exactly an efficient method, but it allowed for an organic growth into unpredictable and often interesting directions.
This early stage study model spatially diagrams the boundaries of the lots making up the site. It acknowledges the resonance of the existing party walls, making apparent the dominant longitudinal quality of the site. With a winding hairpin ramp along a party wall this model begins to suggest the significance of circulation as a prominent entity. It also gestures at the circulation along Houston Street and offers a facade to Roosevelt Park across the street. Its materiality and spareness suggests a quality of lightness and ephemerality.
sketches depicting program elements and their placements in elevation
Program Sketches

These 'program' sketches represent early attempts to workout a spatial elevational placement of programatic entities. From the outset, program was never a fixed variable. It was determined to be a highly flexible factor. It was integral to the thesis investigation to challenge the idea of what a center should be based on contemporary and historic precedents.

Thus, it was important not to be attached to preconceived notions of hierarchy. Because the center is supposed to welcome people of all skill levels in the practice of mind/body training, creating an elevational hierarchy based on 'experience' was found to be extremely limited in meaning and unsatisfying. Similarly, simply allocating and accommodating space for various functions was also found to be lacking in meaning.

In the end it was the most basic diagram from an early sketch that proved to be of most value. It addressed the mind/body duality breakdown but also could be broken down into three pieces of program. Three areas of training often stressed on the 'path' are: correct speech, correct action and correct thought. These are often referred to as Body, Speech and Mind. Thus of the body/mind duality, the mind area can be split into two areas of training: meditation and study.
This model initiates a groping for volumetric definition in the site. Starting with three large programatic pieces stacked atop each other, it takes the inverse approach of the existing buildings on the site. Rather than beginning with a volumetric envelope, it seeks definition through the negative space that surrounds the programatic volumes. This model also attempts to make more significant its public facade interface with Houston Street, and suggests a series of layers or filters as one weaves into the building from Houston Street. The visual variability and transparency of this model spun a variation of sketches.
These elevation/program sketches suggest floating volumes of program within a light grid framework. These ethereal expressions are not mere diagrams they are intentionally meant to express an architecture of light construction.
The stacked volumes implied by these sketches represent programatic assignments. Generated by a study model, the possibility of combinations and order are in a sense infinite.
This model attempts to realize specific spatial qualities and dimensions. It attempts to be a hybrid between the existing row house typology and a newly defined spatial definition. A major spiraling circulation ramp begins to generate a dynamic spatial torque giving rise to the significance of the spatial void. Heightening the drama of the void is a large suspended box and a catawalk. Integral to this interplay is a central shaft. The shaft acts as a node around which the spiral motion coils. Here the ground is given new consideration, it starts to be carved out and not just built upon.
close up: circulation, enclosure, hung volumes

First Street view

aerial view from Houston Street
This study model explores spatial definition through a multitude of suspended, overlapping and shifted planes. In some areas enclosure is readily defined in others it remains ambiguous. Located on the existing lot line, two variously punctured vertical planes replace the former party walls. A vertical shaft, an element carried over from the previous study model, generates its own system of reference around itself. This shaft represents a significant node stimulating a spiraling motion of circulation. The overriding intention in this model was a spatial sense of interconnectedness both horizontally and vertically.
sketch: program elements and circulation in section/elevation
This model sets into motion a clearer attempt to articulate placement of program and circulation. It keeps one row house unit intact and uses the lots of the remaining two to create a void space for a circulating ramp. The path of this ramp is an entity unto itself like the row house and the floating boxes. Three types of language emerge: floating volume, adjoining row house (contextual), and spiraling ramp. The ramp engages the visitor within the void space and provides a counterpoint to the static elements. By its very nature, the ramp itself in a sense represents mind space, or the concept of interpenetration and interconnectedness. The simplification and reductionism from the previous study model affords greater clarity in approaching a finalized scheme. The next step followed with further rigour towards simplification, building scale and materiality.
close up views of the ramp experience
close up views: First Street, punctured party wall, floating volume
This model is the main precursor to the final scheme. It represents a synthesis of various elements and qualities distilled from the former studies. The meaning of a vertical node here becomes a counterpoint to the rooted typology of the row house unit. As such, this vertical node emerges into an independent unit with four sides exposed. It is transparent and light in contrast to the opaque and heavy quality of its context. Its smaller partner, the elevator shaft, is also transparent. The dominant vertical node also serves to enhance the reading of the spiraling motion of a publicly accessible exterior ramp, as in the previous scheme. This is where the contextualism ends and the self-referential system of the center begins. This hybrid approach to designing the center/institute has emerged on the one hand from a sharpened perspective of the various results from the study models but at the same time is completely in line with the philosophical concepts that serve as an inspiration for the project.
three views of final outcome of the thesis project: 1st Street, Houston Street, and aerial view
Final Model/Resolution

The final built resolution to this thesis project culminated as a result of a process of emergent investigation. Creating a vocabulary of forms, layers and spaces and responding as a result of the outcome. The constant re-reading of study models afforded the ability to see relationships and ideas that were unconsciously embedded in previous models. By allowing them to take shape and then discarding them, the underlying ideas grew and developed. Becoming overly attached to specific forms or programmatic concepts tended to lead into dead ends; the final result came about in an organic way.

As in meditation, forms arose and passed away, and an intuitive understanding of certain principles clarified. Abstract philosophical ideas solidified through the experience, in particular the following concepts:

- Habitual patterning
- Dualism
- Interconnectedness (non-duality).

These philosophies were an undercurrent of the entire process, but were not applied in any sort of rigid methodology. Indeed, the scope and breadth of philosophy relating to meditation is vast. These three areas were emphasized because they seemed most pertinent to the architectural challenges at hand. Only in the final phases of the project did philosophy and design come together at last, two abstract and intuitive processes of discovery manifesting in physical form.
third floor

-fourth floor

-fifth floor/roof garden

key:
1. practice room
2. sunken garden
3. reception
4. cafe
5. library/reading room
6. meditation/assembly hall
7. roof garden (open air)
Sankara - Habitual Patterning

According to Buddhist Philosophy, the mind is deeply ingrained with habitual patterns. Reactions of craving or aversion reinforce these patterns, conditioning behavior. By observing the interaction between body and mind, these patterns become apparent. Interrupting them or not reacting to them leads to liberation from conditioned response.

Moving from East to West, the building at first adopts the patterns of the surrounding tenements. The same heaviness of material is repeated, and the line of the neighboring facades does not break down at first. Then, points of open space interrupt this pattern, changes in perspective set in. The spiraling ramp and the luminous library are a more radical disruption of the established patterns, sitting at odds with the line of the tenement to the West, posing the question: does it have to be this way?
Dualism - Apparent Reality

In order to make sense of the world and our actions, we think in dualistic terms. The subject acts upon the object, *I do this to you*, this is separate from that. This kind of thinking, necessary to function in the physical world, can become overly rigid. We think of the mind and the body as two distinct entities, of outside as clearly distinct from inside, of study as something different from practice.

There are many apparent dualisms in the Center. The row house unit (for practice) is heavy, solid, more rooted in the earth and its surroundings, while the glass library tower (for study) is light, airy, and almost appears to float above the sunken garden. One side is made from very dense materials, while the other is lighter, translucent. One could equate these two perceived volumes to the dualistic conception of body and mind.
Interconnectedness - Reality as it is

"Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form"
-The Heart Sutra

Modern science seems to have confirmed the Buddha's assertion that all things are intrinsically interconnected, that there is no real separation. Einstein proved that even matter and energy are interchangeable. At the subatomic level, boundaries between objects are not so clearly defined as they appear to be from our limited perspective. No action can be said to occur in isolation, no person can be said to be totally separate from the world in which we all live. Where does your food end and your body begin? Where does the air I breathe end and yours begin? In meditation, it becomes clear that body and mind act upon each other, and cannot really be separated.

In the center, many apparent dualisms dissolve upon closer inspection. Initial questions regarding internal and external, private and public led to a sense of interconnectedness with the surroundings. The structure reveals and exposes many internal elements. The landscape carves down from the Houston Street side and scoops down towards First Street inviting the public into the complex and suggesting itself as a throughway.
In this sunken garden a glass tower roots itself and rises in perceived contrast to the opaque masonry row house unit, but heavy and light materials interpenetrate between the two apparent volumes. What appears to be a program of two distinct spaces is in fact a program of three inter-related volumes dedicated to different but connected perspectives on the practice. The group meditation hall, suspended between the two volumes, is a connection: meditation as the bridge between body and mind.

The spiraling ramp defies the boundary of indoor and outdoor, weaving in and out of the enclosed spaces. It wraps around the library and punctures the row house but then continues to wind its way up and around to the top of the house unit. The person engaged on the ramp is afforded privileged views of both the complex and the city but at the same time he/she is equally exposed to public view. The physical hardship of the ramp represents both literally and symbolically the persistence and struggle of following a path.
Program: The Practice - Experiencing Reality

“What is formless form? Those are contradictory terms. It’s a paradox. The phrase doesn’t make sense. It is an intuitive and intimate realization; that’s why you can’t explain it to somebody. That’s why practice is so important. Each person needs to see it for themselves.”

John Daido Loori Roshi, Tricycle, Winter 1999

There are many, many types of meditation practice, and the Center will be open to a great variety of teachers and students. It is not designed to support a particular sect or practice, but is divided into three volumes dedicated to general areas based on the Buddha’s assertion that human action - and therefore development - takes place in three areas: body, speech, and mind. Different practices seem to emphasize development in one or the other of these areas, though of course they are all inter-related.
Body

The physical form, the human body. Equated with the manifestation of Buddha-nature in physical form - solid, most easily understood.

Practices: various types of yoga, dance, tai-chi, other physical practices.
The verbalizing, conceptualizing faculty, not just the words themselves. Equated with the manifestation of Buddha-nature in energetic, or imaginative form, more difficult to perceive and understand.

Practices: study, debate, conferences, lectures.
Mind

The quality of awareness. The natural mind, deeper than the conceptual level; that which experiences. Equated with the ultimate manifestation of Buddha-nature, which pervades all reality but is empty and clear. Omni-present, but the most difficult to perceive.

Practices: meditation - single pointed, vipassana, meditation on space, etc.
“...you must decide that the body and mind are neither the same, nor different. Conventionally they are like something that supports and the thing supported, but ultimately they are not two inherently existing objects sharing such a relation.”

- 9th Karmapa, p.71
“...investigate exhaustively and continuously until you realize your self before you were born, before form and void came to be, reaching the point where there is no form or description at all, seeing where there is absolutely nothing outside, where you cannot grasp the elements of body or mind even if you grope forever.”

- Zen Master Keizan, p.197
“When the mind is settled it is a clear resplendence in a non-conceptual state. When it is moving with thoughts, the nature of these thoughts themselves is a clear, void brilliance. It is nothing more than that.”

- 9th Karmapa, p.89
“If you want to reveal the void, do not cover it up. Thoroughly empty, pure and peaceful, it is originally clear”

- Zen Master Keizan, p.107
“... the Buddhas are free from both the sacred and the profane; they have shed both mind and body alike. They are like space, without outside or inside, like the water of the ocean.”

- Zen Master Keizan, p. 23
“Finally, there is the extremely subtle body-mind, where the body-mind duality itself is abandoned. This is the indestructible drop, called “the energy-mind indivisible of clear light transparency.” Very hard to describe or understand, and not to be misconstrued as a rigid, fixed identity, this subtest, most essential state of an individual being is beyond body-mind duality; it consists of the finest, most sensitive, alive, and intelligent energy in the universe. It is a being’s deepest state of pure soul, where the being is intelligent light, alive and singular, continuous yet changing, aware of its infinite interconnection with everything else.”

- Thurman, *Tibetan Book of the Dead* p.40
“When I am involved in deep contemplation I can still hear the noise of the fly crawling up the window pane.”

-Alan Unterman, from Besserman p.31
Illustrations

Figure 1 Photo. Source: http://www.jivamuktiyoga.com. Modified by author.

Figure 2 Photo. Source: http://www.kcl.shambhala.org/index.html. Modified by author.

Figure 3 Photo. Source: http://www.tibet.com/Buddhism/3jewels.html. Modified by author.

Figure 4 Photo. Source: world wide web(unknwown). Modified by author.

Figure 5 Photo. Source: http://www.mro.org/zcnye/firelotus.shtml. Modified by author.


All other images and photos are produced by the author.
Bibliography


